

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ISSUES FOR ENGLISH AS A SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION SETTINGS

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Abstract

As transnational education continues to grow, providing countries are becoming more aware of the need to provide a high quality 'product' in all aspects. This includes not only offering quality courses but also providing the support structures which international students require. In many cases, the educational 'package' is being delivered in the English language, for many students a second or foreign language. While the status of English as a 'world language' makes it highly desirable to have a higher degree in that language, the linguistic and cultural difficulties that this poses for many students should not be underestimated. This paper discusses issues of educational support for international students and offers some suggestions, based on the findings of several research projects undertaken at Curtin University of Technology in recent years.

1 INTRODUCTION

An intercultural interaction is neither a question of maintaining one's own cultural frame nor of assimilating to one's interactant's cultural frame. It is rather a question of finding an intermediary place between these two positions – of adopting a third place. In so doing the participant in the interaction is an experiencer, not an observer of difference. (Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999, p 5)

Curtin University of Technology is amongst the four largest Australian providers of tertiary education to international students, with numbers having shown a steady growth in recent years. University statistics as at August '99 show that it has 3531 onshore and 3297 offshore students, making a total of 6828 international students.

Over the last five years, a number of surveys have been undertaken at Curtin University to gauge the satisfaction of non English-speaking background (NESB) and international student with their courses and with University services, including 'The Experiences of International Students Survey', 1996. Several staff have also undertaken research into the needs of NESB/international students (for example, Bell, 1994, Chung 1995; Hall 1996; Parker, Kirkpatrick & Kisane, 1997, Mullign & Kirkpatrick 1997, Reid, Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 1998).

This paper is based on two further Curtin research projects undertaken in 1998. They are:

- a study examining NESB/ international student perceptions of their linguistic and other education needs (Briguglio, 1998); and

- a study examining assessment practices in the Curtin Business School (CBS) which also focussed on the needs of students whose first language is other than English (FLOTE) (Jones,1999).

The first study presents student perceptions, while the second is based on the views of academic staff.

For the first study (Briguglio, 1998) 18 students from across the University (15 of whom were international students) were interviewed in some depth. The sample consisted of 12 females and 6 males in their first, second or third year or undertaking post-graduate studies. Students also completed a questionnaire which included a brief English language self-rating scale. Semi-structured interviews lasting for between 30 and 60 minutes were taped and later transcribed.

The second study (Jones, 1999) included semi-structured interviews with 23 unit coordinators from CBS and a survey of assessment practices in CBS. While the focus of interviews was on assessment practices, coordinators were also asked about issues relating to the needs of NESB students more broadly.

In both cases, although local NESB students were included in the data, the majority of students concerned were international students. In the case of the second study, CBS has the largest number of international students of any Curtin Division (currently over 60% of Curtin's international students). Within the Division of CBS, international students make up 50% of enrolments. Data from the above studies is supplemented by the writer's experience, over some six months, as Communication Skills Consultant with CBS, which involves ongoing work with international, as well as local students.

Although the term FLOTE is used in the second study, for ease of reference, the terms NESB and/or international student will be used throughout this paper.

2 FINDINGS OF THE PROJECTS

The findings of these projects are reported under the headings of:

- English language and cultural issues
- Other related issues

An attempt was made to separate language and culture issues, but this was not always possible, as the two are obviously related.

2.1 ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Both students and staff are aware and agree that many international students require English language support. However, just what sorts of English language problems international students may be experiencing and what sorts of support might be most appropriate and effective remain complex issues.

2.1.1 Macro-skills

Students were asked questions relating to their English language needs and almost all indicated they could use some support in all four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, with writing and speaking given the highest priority. A self-rating scale which students completed as part of a questionnaire produced the following results for the four macro-skills.

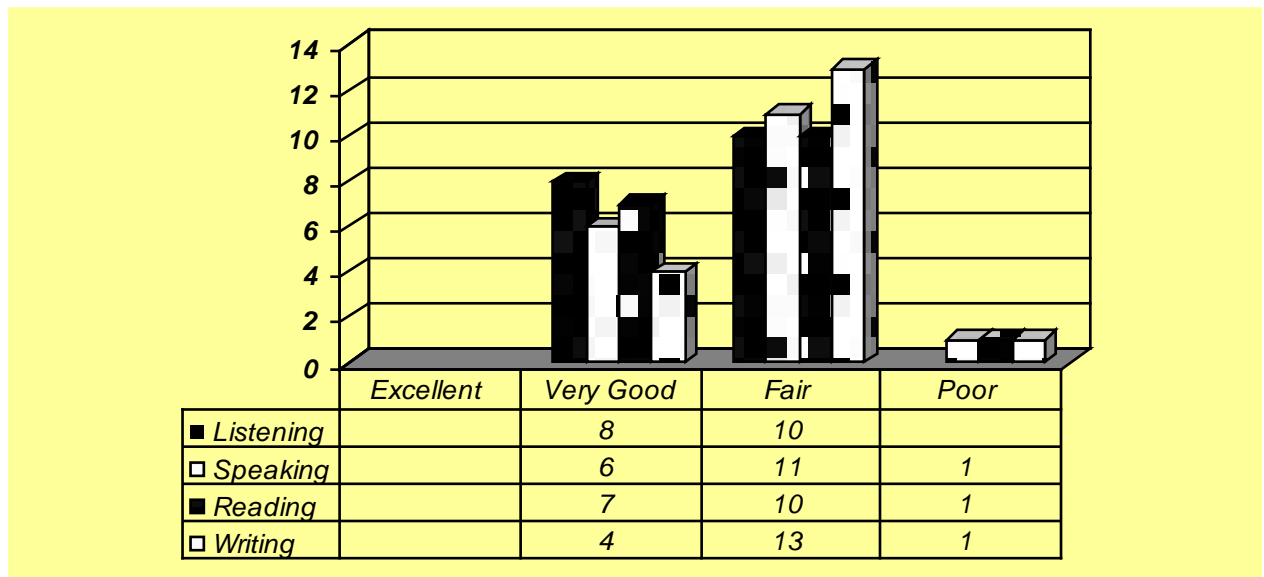


Figure 1 Student self-rating on macro-skills in English, Briguglio, 1998 p 7.

Although there are limitations to self-rating scales, in that individuals may interpret descriptors differently, it is not surprising that writing is the skill that is ranked lowest and therefore, presumably, the one that poses the most difficulty for students, although there is not much difference between all four macro-skills. This is also supported by the Jones (1999) study, where lecturers agreed that students required language assistance in all four skills areas.

Students who reported they needed to improve their speaking skills indicated they did not always feel competent enough in their speech to be easily understood by local staff and students. Students who experienced problems with reading indicated that they found reading in English time-consuming and difficult. For other students, the problem was becoming familiar with the language of different disciplines.

There was some evidence, too, that students have some difficulty with comprehension in lectures and tutorials. This finding is supported by the earlier Mulligan and Kirkpatrick study (1997) and is emphasised strongly in Jones (1999, p 35). As for writing, apart from a concern to write in “grammatically correct” English, a more subtle need was expressed by students, as follows:

And not just [assistance with] writing, but expressing myself in intellectually mature language, in academic language. Because sometimes, that’s what I think is a bit difficult for non English-speaking background people, to make a distinction between, for example, academic language, non-academic language and slang (student cited in Briguglio, 1998, p 6).

2.1.2 Other English Language Skills

Other English language needs reported by students included help required with note-taking, with reading of specialist texts, with essay writing format and with thesis editing. Lecturers also mentioned that support is required with oral presentations, particularly as this is an area that will be receiving future emphasis through the CBS Professional Skills Project (1998), implementation of which began in 1998.

Several students said that they could comprehend formal registers of language (e.g. in lectures) more easily than more casual registers. For this reason they sometimes had difficulty in tutorials following Australian students who, according to them, spoke 'slang' (but who may have been speaking in informal registers). They also perceived 'Australian' students as speaking faster and less clearly than lecturers and tutors. The views expressed by academics in the second study would seem to support this and indicate that academics do make adjustments:

Some of them don't understand the local students. They don't have such a difficulty with me, I generally speak quite slowly. When other students are presenting they can't always get the answers from that and they will come and see me afterwards and tell me that they didn't understand. (lecturer cited in Jones, 1999, p 36).

Several students believed that the best way to improve their English was to mix more with local students, but said they found this difficult for a variety of reasons. One student said that she and her Malaysian friends had made a strict rule for themselves to speak English always, but, not surprisingly, found it difficult to keep to this arrangement when all students in the group were speakers of Malay.

Several students spoke of their frustration when they felt unable to express certain more complex ideas fluently in English. One student expressed it thus:

I want to contribute during the tutorial. I got an idea inside me that I want to get through, but the problem is I don't know how to express it, in a way. The problem with us from overseas, we tend to think in our native tongue and when we speak, sometimes, we can't put our thoughts into words. We sort of can't speak up. We've got the idea, we want to contribute but we don't know how to express it. That's the problem, I think.
(student, cited in Briguglio, 1998, p 8)

2.1.3 Lectures and Tutorials

In regard to lectures, students were asked what sorts of lecturing styles/ techniques they found particularly helpful and easy to follow. Students indicated that they found practical examples which illustrate theoretical aspects particularly useful. Other things which were considered helpful included:

- use of overhead transparencies (which are not whipped away before students have time to copy from them), and
- lecture notes or lecture outlines.

Students reported that in many cases they were already receiving this sort of lecture support. Other useful things were: very detailed unit outlines; lecturers who spoke slowly and clearly and did not use 'slang'; and lecturers who had 'good teaching skills'. On the other hand they found mass lectures very difficult to follow and a few lecturers difficult to understand.

They also require assistance with some academic skills/ concepts. For example, one student indicated that she did not know what was required for a literature review. Upon asking other Australian students, however, she found that they also were unsure of what was required. The need for staff to provide very clear instructions about academic tasks (particularly since there are variations about similar tasks between Schools) is very strongly emphasised in Jones (1999).

Tutorials were of more concern than lectures to students, many of whom said that they found it very difficult to participate in them fully. The reasons for this were complex. Generally, students indicated that they were reluctant to take a more active part in tutorials because:

- they were used to being 'spoon-fed' in their previous schooling system
- they were shy about speaking up
- they felt their spoken English was not as fluent as that of 'Australian students'
- they were not used to the Australian tutorial system.

One student put it thus:

The way and style of teaching and corresponding with the tutors [here] is very different, because we tend to be spoon-fed back home. So when we go to class [here] we just sit and write notes and copy notes but we never tend to interact with the lecturer. But the tutorials here, there are higher expectations. Like, they expect you to sort of consult them and, you know, be more open in class and speak up. But back home, it's like everything is just spoon-fed so there's nothing much to ask. Here we tend to feel shy. It's difficult for us, you know... I'm facing this problem.

(student, cited in Briguglio, p 9)

For reasons such as those expressed above, when students had genuine questions, they would tend to first try to work the problem out for themselves and/ or contact the tutor or lecturer either after the lecture or at some other time. It is difficult, however, for students to seek help from sessional (part-time) tutors who are not on campus very often or do not have an office where they can be contacted.

Academics, on the other hand, tended to attribute students' reluctance to speak up in class to:

- the previous educational experience of international students which, according to them, favours rote learning
- cultural reservations about challenging authority figures or authoritative ideas (Jones, 1999).

While there may be some elements of truth in the above reasons proffered by staff, we can see from the two student quotes above that the reasons are somewhat more complex. Also, studies by Kirkpatrick and Mulligan (1998) and Reid et al (1998) challenge the idea that success in an Australian University depends on the ability to think critically or that all tertiary courses encourage critical thinking. They argue that the problems experienced by international students may have more to do with levels of English language proficiency than with styles of teaching and learning.

2.1.4 Cultural Issues

Both staff and students felt that cultural issues (as they relate to international students) are important, but perhaps in different ways.

Students were asked if, being from a different cultural background, they felt comfortable and supported on the major Curtin campus. Ten (10) students said they felt quite comfortable and 6 indicated they were very comfortable, while 2 students felt they were not supported as much as they could be. One student reported that she felt Australian lecturers may appear more friendly to Australian students because "*Australian students are more open and friendly*" (Briguglio, 1999, p 16). For example, she said she would find it extremely difficult to compliment lecturers on items of dress or to make jokes or speak to lecturers on a more casual basis, as some local students are able to do.

Academic staff who were interviewed by Jones (1999) tended to give more weight to cultural factors as causing 'problems' for international students. They considered that cultural factors accounted for international students':

- different approaches to learning and assessment tasks
- difficulty with unstructured experiential teaching methods
- differing expectation of the role of lecturers (Jones, 1999, p 36).

They believed that this created problems for students in several ways: students tended to find it difficult to express themselves in their own words instead of those used in texts; international students tended to be less active participants in class than local students; and, they tended to want very structured learning and assessment tasks (Jones, 1999).

Neither staff nor students spoke directly about more subtle cultural variations in styles of thinking and learning that are closely related to 'cultural framing' of reality (Reid et al, 1998, & Ballard & Clanchy 1991) and which have some influence on the way we learn and express ourselves. However, this may cause more than a few problems, with students not understanding why lecturers say students cannot present an argument, or reporting that the essays students write lack a logical sequence. It might also explain why international students keep seeking clarification about assignments, since they may lack specific norms about local 'academic culture' which may be quite different to those in their own cultural background (Jones, 1999, p 40).

2.2 OTHER RELATED ISSUES

Students were asked whether they required and had access to study skills support. Several mentioned that this was available through their school and they had found it helpful. About half of the international students were unaware that studies skills classes were offered through the International Office and that they were free of charge. Academic staff also seemed to lack knowledge of the support structures that are in place for students, which sometimes meant that they were unable to refer students to appropriate existing support.

There was a feeling among students that they should not always be left to their own devices and be forced to find out things by trial and error for themselves. One aspect which was sometimes overlooked in regard to international students was the time they needed to become familiar with bureaucratic processes or 'systems' within the University. This was an issue, for example, in regard to learning how the library functioned and what services were available, and in regard to computers.

It also became evident during interviews with students that there is a need to disseminate more information about services in a variety of formats and on an ongoing basis, since orientation programs, by themselves, are obviously insufficient. For example, some students in their second year were not aware of the availability of counseling services and of study skills support and religious support provided by the University.

Becoming acquainted with Australian attitudes and behaviour in the University context could be quite different from what was expected of students in their home country, and could take time. For example, one student explained that in his country of origin students would not be admitted late to a tutorial, would not come to class barefoot and would not consume food in class.

Almost all students decried that fact that there was not enough mixing between students of different nationalities and particularly that international students were not learning very much about the local culture. The following quote illustrates this fact very well:

I find that the international students stick to themselves and the locals stick to themselves and there's not much mingling and I find that it's sad, because for me, I come all the way here and I don't get to mix as much with Australians. And it seems as if I'm just in another land but in Malaysian culture, so I don't get any experience. So it's a waste to come all the way to Australia and not experience the culture fully, you know, so we should encourage mingling. We find it hard to approach the Australians in case, maybe, you don't know what to say. You can say a few words and you don't know how to continue. They probably find it the same, you know...(student, cited in Briguglio, 1998, p 13)

3 SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORT

There are some similarities, though not complete agreement, between the perceptions of academic staff and those of international students themselves about the language and culture issues surrounding international education. The two studies discussed above indicate that much can be done to support international students and point to some major areas for action. These are summarised below, as suggestions. It is pleasing to note that since the above studies were completed, some suggestions have already been implemented.

3.1 Providing Better English Language Support For International Students

The issue of English language support for overseas students has been quite well researched in the Australian and Curtin contexts (see, for example, Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Guthrie, 1994; Latchem, Parker & Weir, 1994; Parker, Kirkpatrick & Kisane, 1997). The trend at Curtin has been to opt for 'communication in context' support. Ideally, this would mean that all lecturers in fact become teachers of language or teach language skills through their discipline. In fact, we know that this is not [yet] the case. Many Schools have attempted to include a basic communication unit or half unit in first year courses within the context of their discipline. Such units have generally been 'service taught' through the School of Communication and Cultural Studies and efforts to make them relevant to the various disciplines have not always been successful.

There are indications that staff do not feel confident in catering for the linguistic needs of NESB/ international students and are not fully aware of what courses/ opportunities there are for them to improve their skills in this area. Comments made by several students during interviews implied that when academic staff were unable to explain things in a way that was more accessible to them, they went for the tried and true method of 'repeat and repeat it louder' or simply became impatient. The situation is thus stressful for both student and staff and is one that needs to be addressed more seriously as Curtin continues to increase its international enrolments. The need for continual staff development and for dissemination of best practice in this area is advocated in both of the research projects addressed in this paper.

Since these studies were undertaken, CBS has established a Communication Skills Centre (one of the recommendations of the Jones report) and appointed a Communication Skills Consultant (the author of this paper) whose chief role is to provide English language support to all CBS students. Students in the Briguglio study (1998) indicated the desirability of individual or small group extra-curricular support. The Centre has the ability to provide contextualised support at point of need. Student needs are addressed through the provision of:

- seminars on communication skills
- small group tutorials
- one-to-one consultation and support.

The Centre has been in operation for six months and demand is growing as students become aware of the services offered. Publicity for such a service needs to be ongoing. As well, linguistic support which is available through studies skills courses offered by the International Office needs to be better and more widely publicised.

Finally, it would seem that there is a need to convince NESB international students that since they are studying in a language that is not their first language, English-language support is something they should actively seek and access wherever available. It may also be necessary to clarify for them that coming from an education system which has used some English language as a medium of instruction does not necessarily mean that they will experience no difficulties with Australian English or with English language use in the Australian tertiary context. Just what sort of approaches might be more successful in this

regard is not clear, but some comments offered by students indicate that they might be more open to advice and mentoring from other senior/ more experienced international students from a similar cultural background. A study by Todd and Nesdale as reported by Maslen (1997) would seem to support such strategies.

3.2 Encouraging Mixing Between Local And International Students

Many students reported that there is not enough mixing in tutorials between international students and local students. (This is, indeed, a national issue, which DETYA has sought to address through a national project). They did not know how to improve this situation, but some indicated that their teachers were structuring activities that would encourage more mixing of students. There are several very successful examples at Curtin of structured intervention by lecturers which has produced excellent learning results for *all* students. Such examples need to be disseminated to staff.

Several students indicated that their school ran a mentoring system, especially for students in their first year on campus. Although one girl reported that she actively sought out a mentor from the same background, another student thought that mentors should all be 'Australian' so that international students would be forced to speak more English and thus improve their English language skills. Students felt that if international and local students were left to their own devices, not much mixing would take place. They thought that the University should encourage students to mix by:

- promoting more mixing between overseas and local students in university housing (there exists, in fact, a University housing policy which promotes mixed accommodation)
- having a mentor scheme between local and international students (these already exist in a number of Schools but can certainly be expanded)
- organising more cultural activities where such mixing could occur.

So far as cultural support is concerned, then, both in relation to supporting the student's first culture and in helping students to learn about the local culture, it was felt that the University needs to be more active. These findings are strongly supported by Nesdale and Todd (1993), Volet and Ang (1996) and by Hawthorne (1997), who indicates that what she terms 'cultural cleavage' or 'cultural enclosure' (ie the lack of interaction between local students and overseas NESB students) is fairly common in Australian universities.

3.3 Developing Staff And Students With The Aim Of Creating A Comfortable Cross-Cultural, International Community

Both local staff and students need to be better prepared to operate in an 'international' atmosphere, the former to be better equipped to cater for the special needs, particularly linguistic needs, of international students and the latter to be more open to interaction with international students.

In regard to staff, some professional development is available in the cross-cultural area and in internationalising the curriculum. However, for a variety of reasons, including perhaps time pressures, the numbers of staff who avail themselves of these opportunities is small. Some staff, particularly those involved in off-shore teaching, feel, perhaps with some

justification, that they have accumulated sufficient experience to make them sensitive to cross-cultural issues. Others, perhaps with less justification, feel that it is up to students to cope.

The rewards for staff to become more professionally developed in these issues need to be greater. A positive step is the Curtin's new policy for off-shore teaching, which includes a requirement for staff to demonstrate cross-cultural awareness prior to departure. Skills, activities and projects contributing towards internationalisation may also need to receive greater formal acknowledgement and recognition by the university. For example, during Cross-Cultural Education Week in 1997, a staff prize was awarded for a project which encouraged cross-cultural student interaction (through structured activity) as part of a unit assignment. This prize is now awarded annually. Other incentives could be positive weighting, for promotional and other purposes, of activities which promote internationalisation.

In regard to students, there is a need for more creative solutions that will encourage mixing between local and international students, both through the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities. Neither local nor international students are taking full advantage of the cross-cultural learning and friendships that the Curtin environment offers. Students in this study indicated that, left to their own devices, very little would change. Research by Volet & Ang (in press), Hawthorne (1997) and Nesdale and Todd (1993) would seem to support this, indicating that proactive intervention is necessary to facilitate intercultural acceptance. Some staff are already structuring classroom learning to encourage cross-cultural interaction. However, this is something that needs to be taken on by all staff at the university. University residences would seem particularly well-placed, in the first instance, to implement extra-curricular activities that could have a more long-lasting effect.

Finally, the University needs to make more of its cultural and linguistic diversity and to promote it as the positive force that it can be. Certainly for some students this is an added attraction:

I think Curtin is great because it brings together people from different nationalities, different cultural backgrounds, people with different opinions, different characters, personalities, everything. If I had to go to a place where everything was quite monotonous, even the people, I wouldn't like it. The diversity here, the variety makes it more interesting, fascinating to come to (Student, cited in Briguglio, p19).

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